DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 648 JC 900 376

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TITLE	Organizing Institutional Research in the Community College. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-89-04
PUB DATE	Dec 89
CONTRACT	400-83-0030
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accountability; *Administrative Organization; College Planning; Community Colleges; Consortia; *Institutional Research; *Intercollegiate Cooperation; *Models; School Effectiveness; Self Evaluation (Groups); State Programs; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Accountability has been a developing issue for community colleges for the past several years. Demands that two-year colleges provide evidence of the achievement of their goals has placed a heavy burden on institutional research offices. A number of organizational models have been used by community colleges in carrying out the research function, including on-site operations at the college or district level, collaborative efforts involving a consortium of colleges, and state-level coordination of research projects. Determining the most effective organizational model for integrating research into college operations depends upon the college's size, organizational complexity, available resources, research expertise, and commitment to institutional research. Four exemplary institutional research models are provided. (JMC)

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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December 1989

EDO-JC-89-04

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Organizing Institutional Research in the Community College

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Accountability has been a developing issue for community colleges for the past several years. Since 1983, all but fourteen states have mandated accountability measures of some type to assess and document the educational performance of community colleges. Many community colleges have responded to these requirements by establishing or strengthening the institutional research function on their campuses.

Addressing Accountability Imperatives

Accountability requirements differ from state to state, but all share the goal of improving educational effectiveness. To achieve this goal, colleges may be required to do any or all of the following: employ a longitudinal approach to measure institutional or program effects on student outcomes; assess student performance in transfer, vocational and basic skills programs; or evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the college's instructional programs and student services as they relate to the effectiveness of the institution. Such demands for accountability place a heavy burden on community college institutional research offices. As Palmer (1988) points out, "each research question has its price tag, both in terms of cost and research expertise, and longitudinal questions on student outcomes are more difficult to address than cross-sectional questions on enrollment or the number of degrees awarded" (p.2).

The traditional role of community college research has expanded from the documentation of student demographics and review of college programs to the overall assessment and evaluation of the college's effectiveness. Moreover, accountability requirements have made institutional research an integral and ongoing part of college administration.

Organizing Institutional Research to Meet Accountability Mandates

MacDougall and Friedlander (1990) identified a number of organizational models used by community colleges in carrying out the research function. These include on-site operations at the college or district level, collaborative efforts involving a consortium of colleges, and the state-level coordination of research projects.

Both the independent and collaborative models have advantages and disadvantages. When a college or district works independently, the scope and design of outcomes can be shaped by researchers with input from administrators, faculty, and support staff to ensure that the research not only addresses local concerns, but also relates to the college's overall mission and objectives. However, college and district research offices are costly to maintain, and research results about an individual school or district may not be generalizable to the region or state. Given differences in definitions and research methods, these results may not be comparable among peer institutions.

Collaborative projects or research coordinated at the state level generally produce normative results for a region or state, and can be used to inform and influence statewide decisions and policy making. Through the pooling of resources, even the smallest colleges can conduct fairly sophisticated and involved studies (McConochie and Tschechtlin, 1990). However, collaborative efforts also have drawbacks. Issues of concern at the state level may not parallel the concerns of individual colleges, and normative results from state or regional research may not provide sufficiently detailed information to inform institutional decision making. The problem of establishing definitions for research variables exists at the state level as well. If the definitions provided by a state research office for variables such as transfer rates or job placement are misinterpreted or interpreted differently by the participating colleges, the statewide results will be unreliable.

Exemplary Institutional Research Models

The institutional research program of Rancho Santiago College in California provides an example of a traditional, centralized research office, well integrated into the college's decision-making process (Slark, 1990). The director of research and planning reports directly to the chancellor, ensuring that research activities inform and support administrative and educational functions at all levels and all departments of the college. Regular meetings between the chancellor's cabinet and the director of institutional research and planning provide a forum for determining research directions and disseminating study

results to individual departments. The IR director plays a significant role in college planning and evaluation, and serves as a campus and team leader.

Santa Barbara City College in California uses a decentralized organizational model to involve faculty and administrators in research efforts (MacDougall and others, 1990). With the college president setting the tone, the institutional research program is conducted by a committee comprised of two deans of instruction, the assistant dean of admissions and records, a counselor, the assistant to the president, and a faculty member familiar with database management. The committee drafts an initial research agenda, which is reviewed by the College Planning Council. The IR committee meets formally with the college president and vice presidents at least four times a year to review findings and implications, and meets regularly and informally with faculty and staff.

The Los Rios Community College District in California utilizes a District Research Council (DRC) to coordinate the activities of a central district research office, three individual campus offices, and studies requested by individual faculty members or administrators (Jones, 1990). The DRC is composed of the district's director of planning and research, the district coordinator of research, a research systems software specialist, the college directors of research, and the director of database processing. The primary role of the DRC is to provide coordination and quality control and make recommendations on district and college research and database priorities. The DRC advises the district's director of planning and research, who in turn advises the chancellor and cabinet.

Maryland's community college system provides a good example of a state-local research partnership (McConochie and Tschechtlin, 1990). The Maryland Community College Research Group (MCCRG) has a representative from each of the 17 community colleges and is chaired by a college research director. Often the results of institutional research projects will be shared at an MCCRG meeting and subsequently the project will be replicated by other colleges or picked up as a statewide project by the group and the State Board. Projects that have generated cooperation and collaboration between all the colleges have generally risen from local research interests that affect a number of colleges or from state information requirements generated by the legislature or other statewide groups. In the case of statewide studies, the MCCRG decides on the research goals and the design of instruments; the State Board coordinates the development of the research instrument and pays for printing; each college conducts the field administration of the survey and reports back findings to the State Board; and, finally, the State Board merges the colleges' survey data into a computer file and provides feedback to the colleges.

Conclusion

As state and local demands for accountability increase, institutional research must become an essential function of the community college. Determining the most effective organizational model for integrating research into college operations will depend upon the college's size, organizational complexity, available resources, research expertise, and commitment to institutional research.

References

Most of the articles cited in this digest will appear in a forthcoming issue of New Directions for Community Colleges, entitled *Models for Conducting Institutional Research*, edited by Jack Friedlander and Peter R. MacDougall. The New Directions for Community College monographic series is published quarterly by Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers in San Francisco. The cited articles are:

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges AUG 10 1990